

Arcade

by Bill Yarrow

My father owned a penny arcade. I worked for him every summer all during my youth. My job was to hand green tickets to customers who achieved a certain score on Skee-Ball or shuffleboard. The coupons could be redeemed for merchandise which we had on display on shelves on the walls and in showcases surrounding the cash register.

It was a boring job, walking up and down the rows of games, handing out coupons to kids and adults, trying to be there when they finished their game, explaining when I had to what the coupons were for, how many you needed to get something, etc.

Every day was the same, except for the times when the buses came in.

The buses brought in the groups.

A group of hearing-impaired students from a nearby college. Their hands were flags, like the semaphore flags of the lifeguards on the beach. They signed their excitement to each other.

A group from a mental institution. Microcephalics mostly. Some kids with Down's Syndrome. Other conditions. But happy.

And then there were the Thalidomide babies, all grown up, handsome boys and beautiful girls, playing Skee-Ball with flipper arms, throwing balls up the lane toward their numbered targets with their feet. I gave them their coupons as I did all the others but inside I shuddered. It was 1963. I was twelve.

I didn't understand what I was looking at, but my dreams did.

For the next twenty years, I had recurring nightmares about Thalidomide babies playing Skee-Ball, their stunted arms and feet becoming more and more marine, blending with images of puffer fish and shark fins and shiny black mussels and horseshoe crabs.

Wikipedia: *The drug, developed by Heinrich Mückter, began distribution in 1957. Used to treat symptoms of morning sickness. Withdrawn from the market in 1961 for causing birth defects. About*

20,000 babies worldwide developed phocomelia. Was later used in the treatment of leprosy. Used today in the treatment of cancer.

Drugs never die.

The heinous becomes the useful.

In our arcade, the arcade that was torn down in 1978, twenty grown-up Thalidomide babies are still playing Skee-Ball.

—“Why are their arms like that?” I ask my mother.

— “Their mothers took a drug that caused birth defects,” she tells me.

— “Why are they bowling with their feet?” I ask my father.

— “It's the only way they can play,” he tells me.

— “What would you like for your coupons?” I ask them.

— “What can I get for this many?” they ask me.

